

## NGONILAND AND THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN IT

woman had her home. The other was the 'gate' of the kraal<sup>621</sup> at the opposite end of the enclosure to the 'big house'. The name by which this 'gate' was known applied also to the space on each side of the gap in the kraal fence through which the cattle went out and came in—a gap which was closed at night with heavy poles. Here at the gate the men<sup>[417]</sup> of the village sat by day, ate their meals brought to them by children from their wives' huts, talked, received strangers, pursued their crafts, and supervised the return of the cattle in the evenings.<sup>[512]</sup>

In and around the main huts within the tall reed fences, the life of a Ngoni household went on. Some of the huts were rectangular, others round. All had a veranda built up above the ground-level and shaded by the house roof. The back parts of the veranda were often enclosed with mats to make additional storage space. In old Ngoni households the open space around the hut was kept swept and mudded and polished like a floor, so that people could sit there in comfort and cleanliness as well as on the veranda. Near the house was one or more little reed platforms about five feet above the ground, where kitchen utensils, gourds and vegetables were laid to dry, and which were used to sit under as shelter from the sun in the hot months. Large and small wooden<sup>342</sup> pounding mortars and poles, clay pots of every size and shape, mats for sleeping and for drying grain, baskets for many purposes, wooden food trays and spoons, gourds of several shapes, formed the traditional household equipment<sup>351</sup> always to be seen outside and around the hut, as well as inside.<sup>417</sup>

In each household, within the main hut, there were two<sup>353</sup> places of particular significance. One was by the two main door-posts at the entrance. These posts with the hollow for the fireplace in the centre of the floor divided the hut into a right-hand and left-hand side—the men's side and the<sup>592</sup>  
<sup>[354]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> and <sup>2</sup> A short list of the vernacular terms for some these common Ngoni place-names is given at end of the book.

## CHILDREN OF THEIR FATHERS

353 women's. For all ceremonies the men sat on the right side,  
 592 and the women on the left, the place of honour for the  
 [562] leading man and woman being by the main door-posts. No  
 young man or woman ever thought of sitting near them.  
 The other place of significance lay between the fire and the  
 back of the hut on the right-hand side; it was known as the  
 [778] 'place of the spirits', the 'ancestors' corner', where the  
 [769] baskets and spears and other ritual objects were kept which  
 were used in the ancestral cult. Only the owner of the hut or  
 those taking part in the ritual could approach this corner.

In this land, into the cultural pattern of Ngoni village  
 and household life, the Ngoni children were born. In such  
 villages and homes they passed their earlier years, and grew  
 from boys and girls to young adults.

*The Ngoni kingdoms*

642 When the Ngoni made parts of Nyasaland their homeland  
 they set up conquest states on the pattern which they had  
 been familiar with in southern Africa. Where they settled,  
 [72] they either conquered the local peoples who lived in that  
 [648] area, or accepted their submission. Until the British ad-  
 ministration was established the Ngoni carried on wars and  
 raids against neighbouring peoples to enlarge the boundaries  
 of their kingdoms. As a conquest state, similar to that of the  
 [162] Ndebele in Southern Rhodesia, the population of the Ngoni  
 kingdoms was of mixed origin, some whose ancestors came  
 from Natal, some from the territories passed through on  
 their northward march, and some from Nyasaland itself.

[643] The kingdoms were organized on a centralized pattern  
 with the Paramount Chief as supreme ruler and subordinate  
 chiefs under him. The Ngoni code of law operated in the  
 [671] courts of the chiefs, and, as they proudly said, 'there was  
 [692] one law for all people'. Military service was required from  
 [702] all young men, and each territorial chief had to bring his  
 [631] quota of warriors to the Paramount's village when a war  
 000 summons went out. Military service, obedience to the law,

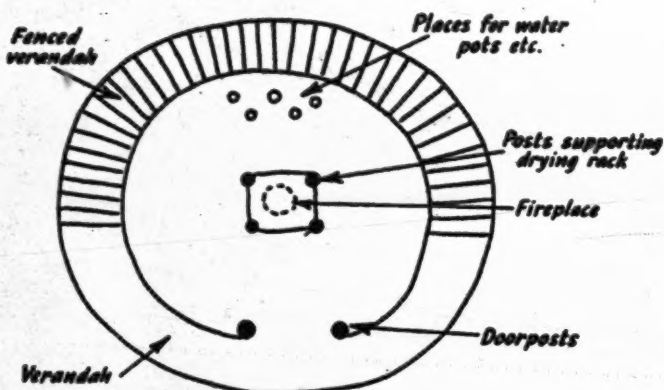


DIAGRAM OF HUT

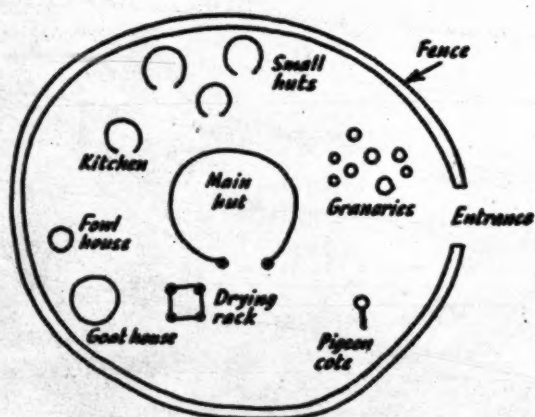


DIAGRAM OF HOUSEHOLD COMPOUND

[p. 74]

## CHILDREN OF THEIR FATHERS

356 in with a smooth round stone. This too was hard work, but every now and then the grandmother, watching and supervising, handed out a lump of clarified fat which quickly brought up a fine polish. The girls were told that this high polish was necessary so that people might sit with pleasure on the floor, and so that all dust and refuse showed up clearly in the morning sweeping of the hut. The floor of the veranda was similarly polished, and, as we saw in Chapter [351] IV, the more important huts had a smeared and polished space all round the front.

● 353 In arranging the inside of the hut girls were taught the right places to put the water-jars and other pots, the baskets and mats, and the bundles of cloth and ornaments belonging to the 'house' wrapped in mats or packed neatly in wooden or tin chests. Brass and bead ornaments, and special cloths [301] for use by men and women on ceremonial occasions, were [292] all kept in the huts of leading women. The ornaments worn [768] by such a woman during her lifetime were returned to the 'house' after her death and looked after in the hut of her successor. These possessions and heirlooms were periodically brought out into the sun, and shaken and aired or polished. 356 A housewife was publicly shamed if she did not take care of such property, and people spread stories that she was careless about keeping the wealth of the house in good repair. Girls were reminded of this when they were called to help at such a 'spring cleaning', and told as a warning: 'So-and-so in that village over there, she let the insects eat the cloth of the house. The mildew spoiled the bead-bands and waistcoats. The green rust came on the brass wire. She was shamed when men spoke about it.'

251 Part of the property of each household was the food stored after harvest or gathered from the bush. Formerly the Ngoni stored their staple cereal in pits dug in the kraal, mudded and fired and covered with a flat rock. The same kind of pit was sometimes made in the side veranda for storing sweet potatoes, but nothing was stored in the kraal.

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614 Clan names, however, are inherited from the father in most Ngoni  
551 families. These names are used as surnames for the purposes of the  
476 Administration, and as forms of polite address. On marriage, a man  
591 and wife may live in either the village of the man or of the woman,  
although the custom whereby initially they should live in the village  
of the woman for a few years is still followed by some.

### III

361 In the village there are dwelling huts, storehouses, pens for the  
small animals, drying platforms, and cattle byres. The huts are  
often arranged in rather uneven parallel lines, with all the huts facing  
351 the same way. The fences found in other parts of the country en-  
closing a small courtyard round the hut, are not often seen here.

349 Each married woman has her own hut, and possibly a smaller hut as  
413 well, used as a kitchen and sleeping place for visitors and children.

Unmarried adolescents of one sex sleep together in modest huts they  
882 have built for themselves or else in a hut left empty by a former  
resident. Where bamboos are available, as in the north and east of  
349 the area, they are used to form the framework of a circular hut. The  
[824] walls are made in two concentric circles, with mud plastered on the  
inside of the inner circle, but with the outer circle often left un-  
mudded. The walls are made in unbroken circles, doorways being  
cut out later with an axe. The space between the two circles is used

[353] for storing pots and other household goods and is sometimes used for  
cooking. The bamboos are woven together, split bamboos going  
horizontally and unsplit ones vertically, so that light is able to pass  
through the unplastered wall. Open lattice fencing is also found  
forming part of the outer wall.

Where bamboos are not available, either circular or rectangular  
huts of pole and mud are made. Rectangular huts are often sub-  
divided with a partition wall, to make a separate sleeping place,  
while the verandah may be partly walled in to make a cooking shelter  
protected from the weather. With both bamboo and pole huts, the

342 /5 cont'd/

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With both bamboo and pole huts, the construction of the walls and roof is the work of men, while women are responsible for plastering walls, floor and verandah, and for collecting the grass for the roof. Pole huts are more often than not plastered on the outside as well as on the inside of the /6/ wall, and women like to make designs on them in plasters of different colour, with inscriptions and drawings.

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The favourite time for hut building is from June to September, when there is comparatively little work to do in the gardens. A man may undertake the major part of the work himself, but if his wife is co-operative and brews beer, he will also get his friends to come and help him, as a working party. Perhaps fifteen or twenty people will come, the men cutting and carrying poles and fixing them in place, the women bringing grass for thatching. If many people attend, then the walls will be put up, and the thatching started, but if the friends are few, then the beer will be finished while the roof of the house is still not thatched, and the owner will have to finish the work himself. In any case, he will need to offer at a later date, either more beer, or salt, or meat, or sometimes money, to women to come and plaster the walls and floor. Building may however be an operation spread over many months, and if the work is started late in the season, the rains may come before the roof is on. In this case, the building may be left until the following year, when there is again time to spare for building, and good supplies of thatching grass are available. Alternatively, the owner may become discouraged, and use the poles for firewood. A well-built pole hut will last five years and a bamboo hut longer.

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Storehouses are built of bamboo or of thick grass, and are sometimes plastered. They have a detachable roof that acts as a lid, and the whole construction is built on a plastered platform about two feet off the ground. Separate storehouses are used for each household and for different crops, maize, finger millet, kaffir-corn and ground-nuts. If a man has two maize gardens, he may keep the produce in separate storehouses. Unmarried and newlywed persons store with their parents. Storehouses last two or three years.

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## IV

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Inside the house most of the household possessions are kept on the floor. At the back of the hut are the pots of the household, large ten-gallon beer brewing pots, smaller pots for holding the beer when brewed, bowls for drinking beer, wide mouthed pots for washing, small deep pots for cooking porridge and relish, waterpots, ornamented gourds for strong beer, and simple gourd cups for water. With them are also enamel saucepans, basins, mugs, and dishes, and sometimes a kettle. Only the very prosperous have glassware or china crockery.

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Pottery is made by women only, and it is not a skill that every woman possesses. In a village there are usually one or two women who make pots, while a few women have a reputation for good pottery that attracts customers to them from a wider neighbourhood.

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Pots are usually sold for money, salt, or in return for bringing twice the amount of clay needed to make the article required. Petrol and paraffin tins as well as enamel and tinware are also used.

[415]

For pot making, clay is chosen from an anthill or marsh, and soaked for three days before being kneaded. The pot is made from a coil, and after smoothing it is ornamented. It is burnt for one day, and may be given a dull black colour by being rubbed with the leaves of the mbwabwa tree.

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Hung on the walls of the hut or lying on the floor are the different baskets owned by the household. Baskets are made by men, and during the dry season when there is much road repair work to be done it is common to see three or four men spending their evenings after work on the road in making baskets. These baskets are often made to order, but the occasional hawker is seen. Large cuboid baskets are used for transporting mealies and grain, shallow baskets of two feet in diameter are used for winnowing flour, and small hemispherical baskets take the place of plates for /B/ porridge. These latter are frequently made in pairs, tied together with a string of beads, so that the second basket acts as a lid for the first and keeps